



How a Small NGO, The Trussell Trust, Mobilized a Nation

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TBRP Perspectives

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How a Small NGO, The Trussell Trust, Mobilized a Nation

Chris Mould

Summary

Every year hundreds of thousands of UK citizens face going to bed hungry. The UK social welfare safety net fails to respond fast enough when citizens seek its help in a crisis. The Trussell Trust designed and implemented throughout the UK a voluntary run local system where a range of food items sufficient to provide three days' nutritionally balanced meals is collected in advanced, stored at accessible locations and distributed through a voucher system operated by a wide range of local frontline workers whose jobs mean they encounter people when in crisis. Annually, over 1 million UK citizens in financial crisis get immediate access to three days' food sufficient to provide full meals for them and family members via the Trussell Trust's franchisees. They get advice and signposting to longer term solutions and support through a coordinated approach which the Trussell Trust drives. Over 4 million citizens support the cause every year. Serious social problems like crime, housing loss, family breakdown, physical and mental ill-health and children being taken into state care are prevented or mitigated as a result. The Trussell Trust's system highlights public service failure and points at policy improvements that would improve the ability of the welfare system to achieve better outcomes.

Keywords

Poverty; Social welfare; Social security; Co-production; Policy; Social franchising

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How a Small NGO, The Trussell Trust, Mobilized a Nation

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Problem discovered

Every year hundreds of thousands of UK citizens face going to bed hungry. A tiny proportion are homeless, the rest have somewhere they call home. About half are in households where someone works. Almost half are children. It's usually a temporary crisis, but the consequences can be devastating. Hunger is hunger. It leads to crime, housing loss, family breakdown, physical and mental ill-health and children being taken into state care. The UK is one of the world's richest nations. It has a substantial social security system that's intended to provide a comprehensive safety net. The problem is it fails; at least it fails to stop food poverty. The system doesn't respond fast enough when citizens seek its help. It doesn't reach all the people who are at risk. It rules some out despite their evident need.

The intervention

To create a situation where no one need go to bed hungry, sufficient nutritionally balanced food has to be immediately accessible and people in crisis need to be steered towards it in a timely way. The Trussell Trust designed and piloted an effective voluntary run local system where a range of food items sufficient to provide three days' nutritionally balanced meals is collected in advanced, stored at accessible locations and distributed through a voucher system operated by a wide range of local frontline workers whose jobs mean they encounter people when in crisis. The food is donated by local people and the voucher system authenticates that beneficiaries are in genuine need. To minimize dependency, signposting to solutions and support is made an integral part of the food distribution. The voucher system records demographic data and information about the primary drivers of each crisis.

The Trussell Trust designed simplicity rigorously into its foodbank system to ensure it is replicable and sustainable. To achieve scale the NGO created a foodbank social franchise, modelled on business format franchising, recruited and trained a nationwide network of franchisees, establishing over 1,600 local foodbank centres in a ten year period. A mass mobilization of citizens is stimulated and facilitated by local community-based NGOs. Their impact is magnified by the coordinated approach the Trussell Trust drives, by the centralized marketing, by the partnerships with media in awareness raising and by the participation of nationwide supermarket chains that make available a platform of widely distributed, accessible food donation points.

To build sustainability, to engage large businesses in support and to speak into public policy review, the Trussell Trust used the scale of the network and the highly participatory nature of its processes to build public awareness of the problem, actively working with national media to maximize the reach of its communications.

Details of the impact

The Trussell Trust's pilot foodbank provided 3,000 three day emergency supplies of food in 2003/4. Ten years later the Trussell Trust foodbank network provided over 900,000 three day supplies. By 2018/19 the numbers had risen to 1.6 Million. By 2014 over 45,000 frontline care workers were registered voucher holders. The service had become an essential tool for tens of thousands of workers trying to help clients in crisis. By then all the UK's major supermarkets had found ways to provide practical support, including setting up foodbank donation points at the exits of most major stores. Between 2012 and 2017 Trussell Trust foodbanks benefited from at least £2m a year from Tesco operating margins. This partnership was followed by a £20M three year arrangement with ASDA Walmart. The Trussell Trust foodbank system successfully convinced big food businesses both to co-fund and to co-produce solutions. By 2014 an estimated 4 million citizens were donating food.

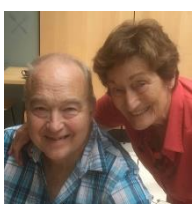
By highlighting the existence of food poverty and the social and economic damage that it caused, the Trussell Trust provoked vigorous political debate about the problem and policy responses to it. In December 2013 and January 2014 over six hours of parliamentary debate at Westminster was dedicated to this issue. Amidst calls for a public inquiry, the Feeding Britain Enquiry was launched. In February 2014 the NGO's Executive Chairman and its Chief Executive had one to one discussions with the Prime Minister. Trussell Trust foodbank data signaled major public service failure. Joining forces with other key anti-poverty NGOs the Trussell Trust was able to successfully use its comprehensive data and experience to lobby for changes in welfare sanctions policy and practice and later to Universal Credit.

By working to build widely effective media relations the Trussell Trust brought hidden hunger to the attention of a nation. In April 2014 when the Trussell Trust published its annual foodbank statistics the issue was reported in 879 outlets in a 24 hour period. A hitherto unrecognized social issue that was often initially the subject of political denial, became unavoidable in mainstream politics by 2014, with phrases like "foodbank Britain" entering the general lexicon, foodbanks featuring in the story lines of several TV and radio soaps and in major political parties' manifestos.

About the organization

The Trussell Trust began life in 1997 as a small, community-based anti-poverty charity providing humanitarian aid and working with marginalized Roma people in Bulgaria. The foodbank project started in Salisbury, UK, as a response to a challenge to do something about poverty "at home". The Trussell Trust launched its foodbank social franchise in 2004. At that point its annual income was less than £150K. By 2018 its annual income had risen to £7.27M, a fiftyfold increase. The Trussell Trust remains an independent, faith-based voluntary organization which does not receive any public funds. Today it actively campaigns for policy change and works with a range of other NGOs to end the need for foodbanks in the UK.

About the leaders



Paddy and Carol Henderson, highly creative, practical entrepreneurs, founded the Trussell Trust, coming up with the inspiration for the Trussell Trust foodbank and designing the unique model which proved so enduringly effective. They retired in 2007.



Chris Mould came up with the inspiration for the social franchise as a means of replication and scale. He led the transformation of the Trussell Trust from local, community-based charity to recognized and award winning national anti-poverty charity with strong practical presence right across the UK. He was the Executive Director and Executive Chairman from 2007 to 2017.



David McAuley was Operations Director then Chief Executive. Between 2009 and 2017 he established the NGO's headquarters functions and ensured it had the essential organizational competences to undergird its dramatic growth.



Molly Hodson was Head of Marketing and Communications. She spearheaded an extraordinarily effective campaign to build awareness of the problem of hidden hunger and food poverty. The sustained and innovative nature of the campaign was critical to the impact that was achieved.

Sources to corroborate the impact

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